

Wheeler House  
Orford Street, Southernmost on the Ridge  
Orford, Town of Orford  
Grafton County  
New Hampshire

HABS NH-80

HABS  
NH,  
5-ORF,  
3-

PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Eastern Office, Division of Design and Construction  
143 South Third Street  
Philadelphia 6, Pennsylvania

## WHEELER HOUSE

HABS  
NH  
5-GRF

Location: Orford Street, Southernmost on the Ridge, Orford, Town of Orford, Grafton County, New Hampshire.

Present Owner: The Wheeler Family, c/o Alexander Wheeler, Hutchins and Wheeler, 294 Washington Street, Boston 8, Mass.

Present Occupant: Various branches of the Wheeler Family.

Present Use: Year-round vacation residence.

Brief Statement of Significance: One of the larger, more elegant houses in a row of seven houses which are distinguished by their size and elegance in this very small, rural town. [See Part I, C, Supplemental Material].

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History

1. Original and subsequent owners: Built and originally owned by John B. Wheeler, a prosperous Orford merchant, the structure has remained the property of his descendents.
2. Date of erection: Wheeler purchased the property on which the structure stands from Samuel Morey on April 4, 1814, and presumably built the house soon after since he had been a successful merchant in Orford for ten years. Internal evidence indicates that the main part of the house was built at a different time from the ell, presumably a few years later since that was customary and the changes that were necessary to accommodate one part to the other appear in the ell rather than in the main part of the house.
3. Architect: Locally the house is attributed to Charles Bulfinch. The owners have had the house examined by Henry R. Shepley, Architect, Boston, who would also attribute it to Bulfinch. No documentary evidence has been found connecting Bulfinch with the structure. Bulfinch was active in Boston at this time although it was difficult a period for him. About 1814, he spent some time in jail as a debtor and suffered from lameness due to a fall. In 1817 his fortunes picked up when he was called to Washington to replace Latrobe as architect of the capitol.
4. Notes on alterations and additions: No evidence was found of major alterations or remodellings other than that noted above in connection with the joining of the main part of the structure to the ell.

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5. References:

- a. Mrs. Hodgson, "Origin and History of Orford's Ridge Houses" (Mimeographed paper in the possession of Mrs. Hodgson, Orford, New Hampshire, 1954). See Part I, C. below.
- b. Report of the Celebration of the 150th Anniversary of the Settlement of the Town of Orford, New Hampshire (Hanover, New Hampshire: The Dartmouth Press, 1915).
- c. Andrew A. Titcomb, "The Old Houses of Orford Ridge at Orford, New Hampshire" (student thesis in Baker Library Archives, Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire n.d.).
- d. R. B. Derby, "Early Houses of the Connecticut Valley," White Pine Series of Architectural Monographs, II, No. 3 (1916), p. 11.

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure: John B. Wheeler, original owner of the house, financed the Dartmouth College Case, Dartmouth vs. the State of New Hampshire. This case, important in coporation law, was argued before the U. S. Supreme Court by Daniel Webster for Dartmouth.

C. Supplemental Material:

The following is a complete copy of a mimeographed paper prepared by Mrs. Hodgson, Orford, New Hampshire, from an examination of Orford Town Records:

Origin and History of Orford's Ridge Houses

Mrs. Hodgson  
1954

"The row of seven houses on Orford's Ridge was begun in 1792 with the building of Samuel Morey's home in the center of the row. At that time, Morey, who was an inventor, farmer, lumberman and mill owner, owned the entire tract of land now occupied by the houses and their property. He had come to Orford in January on 1766 at the age of three, traveling by ox sled with his parents and two brothers. They were the second family to settle in the wilderness of the new township. In the winter of 1793 Samuel Morey's house comprised only a small portion of the present ell. Stable, store-house or carriage room and a woodshed with gracefully arched opening had been built. The living quarters consisted of one room with adjoining pantry, beneath which was a shallow cellar, and upstairs a second floor of one bedroom whose ceiling sloped like the two attic rooms over the sheds. The little home was valued at only nine dollars in the tax report of 1792, but it was commodious enough to be the scene of a town meeting which was announced in February, 1793, as being scheduled to occur March 12th 'at Capt. Sam'l Morey's new house'. A further and more pretentious

addition was soon in progress which raised the value of the house to \$15. The excavation of its deep cellar presented some difficulty according to a letter written in April by Hannah Morey to her husband, Samuel, who was then in New York endeavoring to promote interest in his recently invented steamboat. 'The house is progressing slowly,' she wrote, 'because of frost in the ground which prevents the digging of the cellar...Men are much hampered for lumber, especially boards...' However, the work was finally done and the Morey's now had a fine keeping room and a corresponding bedroom above, with the advantage of a flat ceiling, for this new part of the house was lofty enough to allow attic space over the second floor. Gradually the house grew. The ell was completed by the addition of another ground floor room with bedrooms above. The entire house, including the large front portion featuring a fanlight doorway topped by a palladian window, was reputedly not completed until 1799. In the year its evaluation for taxes had arrived at \$200, but certain improvements, such as the large detached barn at the head of Morey's lane, may have been constructed later, for in 1800 the house was worth \$300; in 1804, \$350; in 1805 and thereafter it was valued at \$400.

"It was in 1805 that Samuel's father, Israel Morey, who had recently been living in Fairlee across the river, built a small house on the Ridge just south of Samuel's. It was worth only \$16 until the next year when it had increased in value to \$60. Its final assessment of \$66 leaves one wondering what improvement could have been made for six dollars.

"In 1814 on April 4th Samuel Morey sold two plots of Ridge land, one to a young lawyer by the name of John Rogers, whose grandfather, a graduate of Harvard University, had come to Orford in 1770. John was thirty-two when he became the owner of Ridge property. Married four years, he was the father of two children, with four more to follow. He eventually held several town offices, was a selectman and justice of peace. He also became a member of the New Hampshire House of Representatives and deputy sheriff of the country. The other Ridge plot that Morey sold in 1814 went to an older man, John B. Wheeler, whose five children ranged in ages from a daughter of six to a son in Dartmouth College. Ten years previously Mr. Wheeler had bought land, also from Samuel Morey, on the south corner of Bridge Lane and the River Road where he established the prosperous store that is standing there today. Mr. Wheeler's Ridge land consisted of 4-1/2 acres for which he paid \$1,062, while Mr. Rogers bought only one acre and 64 rods for \$350. Though they acquired their land on the same day, Mr. Wheeler was the first to build and his house became the southernmost one on the Ridge. He patterned it after the fashionable Bullfinch style of architecture with admirable results. Very soon thereafter Mr. Rogers paid him the highest form of compliment by copying its facade in the construction of his own house just north of Mr. Wheeler's. His front hallway, however, established its own individuality with a charming 'good morning' stairway that ascends opposite the entrance door to a

landing where it branches out at right angles to the left and to the right, forming separate flights of stairs that give access to each of the two front bedrooms. If their occupants, after a comfortable night's rest, should happen to emerge simultaneously from their rooms they would face each other with, one trusts, a cheery good morning. Both Rogers and Wheeler bought more land from Morey after building their homes. Five years later Mr. Rogers increased his holdings by another acre and 22 rods of land behind his house for which he paid Morey \$400. Mr. Wheeler enriched Morey by \$900 when in 1826 he bought land to the south of his property which included a dwelling house, possibly the story and a half cottage now standing on the southern end of the Ridge.

"The fourth of the present Ridge houses to be constructed was built by Samuel Morey as a wedding present to his daughter, Almira, when in 1819 she married Leonard Wilcox, a Dartmouth graduate and lawyer who became a judge and United States Senator. Morey's gift included twenty acres of land which he deeded to her 'in consideration of the natural affection I bear to my beloved daughter, Almira, and also of one dollar'. The twenty acres took in the strip of land between Mr. Roger's plot and her father's lane, following along the lane to his barn, thence around the barn to his orchard gate, skirting the orchard and extending back onto the hill behind Rogers' and Wheeler's property. The house Morey built for Almira was an addition to the old structure once occupied by his parents who were no longer living. In about 1833, after Almira's death and Leonard's second marriage to Mary Mann, the one storey front was added, transforming the earlier part into an ell. An interesting feature of the house in Almira's day was a covered foot bridge connecting her home with the ell of her parents' house, built by her devoted father in order that she might visit them conveniently in all weather without wetting her feet. It was located between the second stories of the two houses, high enough so that Morey's ox team with a generous load of hay could pass beneath it.

"In the winter of 1822 Dyer T. Hinckley, merchant, bought one acre and 64 rods of Ridge land north of Morey's. His boundary line passed close to Morey's workshop, in the shade of a large butternut tree, scene of various and extraordinary inventive experiments. Hinckley paid Morey \$350 for his plot, the same price that John Rogers had paid eight years previously for similar Ridge acreage to the south. Within two years after Mr. Hinckley's original purchase he obtained more land from Morey, paying him \$373 for twenty-four and three quarters acres and sixty-three rods extending back from the Ridge. Mr. Hinckley's house, unlike the others already built on the Ridge, was constructed of brick instead of clapboard or siding. Today it is painted yellow, while all the others are white, but perhaps in Mr. Hinckley's day it retained its natural red brick color. He graced the interior with arched doorways and a beautiful curved stairway ascending from the front hall. Built spaciouly on the traditional plan of an ell terminating in a square front, the exterior followed the general style of Mr. Rogers' and Mr. Wheeler's houses featuring a fanlight doorway sheltered by a small portico surmounted by an iron balcony railing.

"In 1825 the Hinckleys were living in their new home and another Orford resident contemplated building a house on the Ridge. William Howard, manufacturer of top hats, bought 2-1/2 acres and ten rods from Morey for \$640. His plot adjoined Mr. Hinckley's on the north and here he built the northernmost house on the Ridge. The day Mr. Howard bought his lot, Mr. Hinckley prudently avoided encroachment on the part of his new neighbor by investing \$50 in a strip of land a rod wide between the two places, but according to report Mr. Howard was all that anyone could ask for in a neighbor, an industrious, honest, worthy citizen with uncommon energy and perseverance, a selectman of the town and postmaster for thirty years. He came to Orford in 1799 at the age of twenty-four after serving his apprenticeship as a hatter at Norwich, Conn. He was a man of fifty by the time he had prospered to the extent of building his house on the Ridge. His first wife died leaving him seven children and he had been married five years to his second wife who produced five children. It is no wonder that he required a home of considerable proportions which, fortunately, his success at his trade made possible. The house he built was made of brick like Mr. Hinckley's and remained in its natural red color for many years before being painted white as it is today. The doorway, too, resembled Mr. Hinckley's, as did the graceful curved stairway in the front hall. An extra touch of elegance was added to the exterior by a tasteful balustrade surrounding the edge of the roof which was also a feature of the earlier houses built by Mr. Wheeler and Mr. Rogers, though the one on the Rogers house has since been removed. In 1833 Mr. Howard invested \$240 in the purchase of approximately three more acres north of his house lot.

"The seventh and last erected Ridge house was built by Stedman Willard who, on April 2nd, 1838, paid Morey \$1,000 for nine acres between the Hinckley property and Morey's own house. A year later he added 61 acres extending back from the Ridge for which he paid \$1,300. At this time his house was in construction next door to Morey's on the north. By then Morey had moved to Fairlee and his remaining property had been bought for \$1,000 by Leonard Wilcox who in turn sold the house and two acres of land to Dr. Willard Hosford for \$800. Morey's original homestead farm which had once spread so extensively from the woods and hill behind the Ridge, where he had fenced in a large deer park, to the east bank of the Connecticut River was now entirely sold off. Even his lane and barn, retained by Leonard Wilcox, no longer were a part of the house property bought by Dr. Hosford. The sight of Morey's old workshop beside the butternut tree was included in Stedman Willard's tract and the shop has given place to a large barn. Mr. Willard's house was capacious and high ceilinged in proper keeping with his position in Orford as a prosperous merchant, forty years old, a deacon of the church, a representative in the state legislature. He had come to town at the age of fourteen, had found a job as clerk in Mr. Wheeler's store, and finally established his own store at the foot of his Ridge property. He also married Mr. Wheeler's daughter, Meriel, but she was not destined to enjoy his lofty and impressive Ridge house. After presenting him with seven children she died a year before he bought the property, so his second wife whom he

married just two months after buying his land was accorded the privilege of being mistress of a home on the Ridge.

"Thus were the houses built and lived in for many years by the original owners. Two are still retained by families of the same name. Mr. John Wheeler's house was bought by his nephew, Daniel Prescott Wheeler, in 1844. When the latter's widow died in 1902 the property went into the possession of Henry Wheeler, son of Daniel Prescott Wheeler's half brother, and is still owned by members of Mr. Henry Wheeler's family.

"The house built by Morey for his daughter, Almira, is owned by Dr. Herbert B. Wilcox, a descendant of Almira's husband, Leonard Wilcox and his second wife, Mary Mann.

"John Rogers' house between those of Wheeler and Wilcox, was bought in 1841 by Hartwell C. Cushman who then owned and operated the old Wheeler store. Later the house was reconstructed and maintained by Cushman's granddaughter, Mrs. Addison G. Fay (now Mrs. Louis H. May) who sold it in 1937 to Mr. Lyman T. Dyer. The present owner, Mr. Wheelock, purchased it in 1952 from Mr. Dyer's daughters.

"Samuel Morey's house, as has already been stated, was owned and occupied by Dr. Willard Hosford, and then by Dr. Walter R. Barnes until 1913 when Mr. Frank C. Doan purchased it, in whose family it still remains.

"Mr. Hinckley's yellow brick house was sold at public auction in 1836 after Mr. Hinckley and his wife had died. Edward Bissell, local merchant and nephew of Samuel Morey, was the highest bidder with his offer of \$1,525. Mr. Bissell's wife was the daughter of Orford's hat manufacturer, Mr. Howard, so no doubt Mr. Bissell, who was only thirty-six, was proud that he could provide her with a home as fine as her father's next door. It also had the distinction of housing Daniel Webster as a guest of the Bissells during their tenancy. Since then the house has had many owners. Some time after 1865 it was bought by Mrs. Daniel Wheeler, wife of John Wheeler's grandnephew. At her death in 1900 she left it to Miss Helen Dana. It was subsequently owned by Mr. Fessenden, Mr. J. E. Owsley, Mr. Earl B. Wilson whose grandfather, Hartwell Cushman, had owned the Rogers house, and at present by Mr. Beal.

"Mr. Howard's house, on the northern end of the Ridge, was sold to Judge William F. Dana, brother of Helen Dana who resided in the yellow brick house beside it. It was next sold to Mr. J. E. Owsley, then to the author, Charles Jackson, who sold it again this past year.

6th	5th	7th	1st	4th	3rd	2nd
Howard	Hinckley	Willard	Morey	Wilcox	Rogers	Wheeler
north ----- south						

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

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A. General Statement

1. Architectural Character: One of the larger, more fully finished and detailed houses in a row of seven houses which are unusual for their size and elegance in this very small, rural town. The house survives basically unchanged.
2. Condition of Fabric: The house is structurally sound and maintained in excellent condition.

B. Technical Description of Exterior

1. Overall dimensions: 49 feet wide x 35 feet main front block, plus 18 feet wide x 32 feet rear ell. Two stories plus attic and basement.
2. Foundations: Large blocks of cut granite.
3. Wall construction: Timber frame; wide, flush, horizontal siding on front; clapboards on other walls.
4. Porches, stoops: Front porch--10 feet wide by 3 1/2 feet, plus two steps 10 feet wide; one story high; floor and each step a monolithic granite block carefully cut; two, slender, reeded columns; slightly modified Roman Doric order; surmounted by a wrought iron balustrade.

Northeast side porch - 5 1/2 feet wide x 5 feet, one story high; frame with clapboard; semicircular roof; three large granite steps.

Southwest side porch - 33 feet wide by 8 feet, one story high along entire side of ell; shed roof, shingled supported along outside by four wood posts.

Southwest side porch along main block - modern, built 1959.

5. Chimneys: Two brick chimneys in front block of house, one in ell.
6. Openings
  - a. Doorways and doors: Front door - large, six panel, wood door with side lights and fan lights. Two side doors on main block and one door on ell - six panel, wood doors. One pair French doors leading to modern porch on Southwest side of main block.
  - b. Windows and shutters: 6/6 light, double hung windows. Fixed, slat shutters.



## 7. Roof

- a. Shape, covering: Hipped roof on main block. Slightly lower, gabled roof on ell. Asphalt shingles on both roofs.
- b. Cornice, eaves: Boxed, wood eaves in modified Roman Doric style with mutules and moulded and beaded trim.
- c. Dormers: Two, small, gabled dormers on back side, Southeast, of main block.
- d. Balustrade around hipped roof of main block, turned balusters above windows, paneled between.

## C. Technical Description of Interiors

1. Floor Plans: Central hall type plan, living rooms to either side, dining room extends into ell, kitchen and storage rooms in ell. Second floor, bedrooms.
2. Stairways: Main stairway, central hall, straight run with short curved portion at top turning 90 degrees, moulded trim, plain rail with square balusters. Back stairway, L-shaped. Servants' stairway in rear part of ell.
3. Flooring: Wide Pine boards.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Painted or papered plaster.
5. Doorways and doors: Mostly four and six panel doors.
6. Trim: Moulded wood trim. Deep, paneled, window frames with paneled interior shutters. The two living rooms have large mantels with paired colonettes and extended mantel shelves with beaded mouldings and plaster wainscotings with moulded, wood bases and ornate, reeded, wood chair rails.
7. Hardware: Mostly original brass and wrought iron.
8. Lighting: Electric.
9. Heating: Later central heating system supplements original six fireplaces.

## D. Site

1. General setting and orientation: House faces northwest, the southernmost of seven houses on a low ridge, about 450 feet from the street, in a very small, rural village.
2. Enclosures: White, painted, board fences.

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3. Outbuildings: Barns, smoke house, chicken houses, sheds, etc.
4. Walks: Packed dirt and cinders.
5. Landscaping: Informal lawns, gardens and large trees.

Prepared by Osmund R. Overby and Henry C. Edwards  
Architects, National Park Service  
September 1959

Addendum to  
Wheeler House  
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